



GCC Security Priority Sets It at Odds With West

by Michael Stephens

Concerns for Iranian ambitions take precedence over fears of Islamic State

Since the Arab Spring revolutions began to radically overhaul the established order of regimes, opening up the space for conflict and instability, the Gulf states have become increasingly shaken from their quietist security doctrines. Asserting their interests through direct military intervention has become a tool in the arsenal of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states' foreign policies, including in Libya and Bahrain in 2011 and most recently Yemen following the enforced exile of it GCC-backed President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

Where they deploy

The retrenchment of US hegemonic influence in

the Middle East has also forced the Gulf states into a more active stance. This is the result of inevitable competition between rival regional players to fill power vacuums and also a consequence of years-long conversations in which the West paternalistically encouraged GCC countries to take more control of their own security affairs. These discussions focused on the confines of security in the Gulf itself, and very little attention was paid to the potential for the Gulf states to operate extra-territorially.

Gulf states' military deployments are determined by their understanding of the triggers of regional disorder in the Levant and the Gulf, along with the accordant rise of Sunni extremism across the region. The current paradigm espoused by thinkers in Abu Dhabi, Manama, and Riyadh views the rise of Sunni extremism as a reaction to the policies of Iranian-backed allies, notably Bashar Al-Assad in Syria; Shia militias in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria; and the Houthis in Yemen.

Iran's influence

The belief is that (1) Iranian allies actively seek to monopolize political power; and (2) that Iran encourages its proxies to feed off the instability and dysfunctionality of the states within which they operate in order to solidify Tehran's control of the security sector. Under this paradigm, the emergence of a radically violent anti-Shia grouping like the Islamic State (IS) is seen as a natural reaction to attempted Iranian subversion and domination of the security space.

This logic explains why the Gulf states have largely refrained from directing their energies toward destroying IS in Syria and Iraq, because this is seen as avoiding the root cause of region-wide instability. Both the Emiratis and Saudis ran successful bombing missions against IS target in Syria. But then Yemen's descent into chaos in late 2014 quickly refocused region-

al military priorities. Almost all Gulf military capacity was moved down south to launch Operation Decisive Storm, a hard-hitting campaign against the Houthi militias and their backer, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. As a result, the number of GCC airstrikes in support of the anti-IS coalition dropped to a trickle.

The Yemen question

This refocus of military efforts is partly due to Saudi Arabia's historical involvement in the political matters of its southern neighbor. But it also reflects Saudi fears of regional instability being exploited by Tehran. Riyadh could ill afford expanded Iranian influence on yet another of its borders. Both the kingdom and its Emirati partners have paid a price in blood in their attempts to blunt Iranian ambitions in Yemen. It is a high price, but one which the GCC leaders appear willing to pay, and which for the most part their citizens appear willing to accept.

On 30 November 2015, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Anwar Gargash noted that the Saudi-led coalition's actions in Yemen presented "an alternative model" to the US-led war on terror, which he deemed insufficient to deal with the regional security challenges of the day. The question for Western states is now whether to back this "alternative model" across all potential spheres of conflict in the region, and there appears a curious paradox whereby Western states signal support through continued arms sales while simultaneously shying away from offering political support to Gulf military activity, as it does not fit with Western priorities for the region. Certainly the alignment of interests between the West and the Gulf does not neatly overlap, given that in Yemen Saudi-led military operations have exacerbated the scale of the humanitarian suffering—which is a deeply uncomfortable for the west—and the relative lack of GCC military action in Syria against IS or against Al-Qaeda in

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Yemen, when defeating both organizations is the number one goal for Western policy makers at the current time.

The West was unsurprisingly caught off guard by the shift in GCC military action in recent years. Although tensions within the Gulf itself are high, they are largely offset by sizeable Western military deployments. As a result, the cold war between the Gulf states and Iran is now playing out in proxy conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. That the US, France, and Britain will do little to insert themselves into these conflicts outside of the need to focus on IS and Al-Qaeda leaves the field open for direct military conflict between Gulf states and Iranian proxies.

Despite pressure placed on the Gulf states to deploy more military assets across Syria to face IS, it is unlikely that they will be swayed from their focus on the war in Yemen. The recent announcement by Saudi Arabia of a 34 nation anti-terror coalition was designed to correct the impression that the Gulf has not been doing enough. But the omission of Iran and Iraq from the coalition only underlines the notion that Iran and terrorism are intertwined in the Saudi mindset. And so tensions between the GCC and the West over Middle Eastern priorities are likely to continue. The GCC continues to view Iranian ambitions in the region as a priority threat while the West would prefer a focus on defeating IS—a disconnect that might present an opportunity for Tehran to exploit to strengthen its own position with the West.

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